

MONIKER: ETYMOLOGY AND LEXICOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

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Oxford English Dictionary defines *moniker* as “a name (esp. an assumed one); a nickname, epithet and under ‘Etymology’ notes that the origin is uncertain. Various possible sources have been suggested, the dictionary continues, such as that the word arises from back-slang for *eke-name* or represents a special use of *monarch* or of *monogram*¹. *Back-slang* is in turn defined as “a kind of slang in which every word is pronounced backwards; as *ynnep* for *penny*”.

Although no interest in recording slang, cant, the popular speech of what was then perceived as the lower, itinerant, vagrant, or criminal classes and groups is evident in the history of English lexicography—defined in its broadest terms—from the Elizabethan period onwards, as reflected in such writers as Robert Greene, and selective use of such popular vocabulary can be found as early as Chaucer (Blake 1999), *OED* has shown little interest in pursuing etymologies, and often seems content with a simple class affiliation. *Cove* is a good case in point. The dictionary speculates that it may be identical with Scottish *coffe* ‘chapman, pedlar’ (cf. *chap*) and relegates it to “a lower and more slangy stratum of speech”. Despite *OED*’s concluding judgment, “the origin of the word still remains obscure”, it has long been accepted that *cove* reflects the masculine singular demonstrative pronoun of Anglo-Romany, *kov* ‘that (man)’. *Shiv/chive* ‘knife’, which *OED* calls “thieves’ cant”, is another example. *Chiv* is the standard Anglo-Romani word for ‘knife’. As for the word *cant* itself, the dictionary, seemingly only reluctantly, lists Gaelic

cainnt ‘language’ as having fed into other linguistic strands, including derivatives of *chant*, religious services seen in derogatory fashion.²

In the case of *moniker*, just some 80 years after what the *OED* gives as the first written attestation (1851), R.A.S. Macalister, in *The Secret Languages of Ireland* (1937), suggested that the Shelta word *munika* (vars. *munik*, *munika*, *muniska*) ‘name’ might reflect Irish *ainm* ‘name’. He also called attention to the English cant word *moniker*.³ Other standard etymological dictionaries either reproduce Macalister’s speculation without comment or have no entry at all for *moniker*.⁴ In Shelta, the cryptolect also known as the Cant, Gammon, Sheldru or Pavee of the Irish travelers (often called ‘tinkers’, today less often ‘gypsies’), the resequencing of letters or syllables is common, e.g., *gored* < Irish *airgead* ‘silver’, *lakín* < *cailín* ‘girl’, to cite only some transparent instances.⁵ Since Irish *ainm* was pronounced with an epenthetic schwa vowel between the consonants, a cant form *mVnV* or **muni-* seems a plausible starting point. But how might the remainder of the word be accounted for, and the distinction (how great?) between Shelta *munik/munika* and English *moniker* be explained?

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In early Irish *ainmm* meant ‘reputation, repute, renown’ as well as simply ‘name’ (and also ‘noun’ in grammatical terminology). This would prepare the way for a derivative that referenced the social persona of another member of the community, what we might also call a byname, epithet, or nickname, occasionally assumed but usually assigned. Despite the superficial similarity of *moniker* and Irish *ainmmnigdir* ‘names’, the latter originates in the verbal noun *ainmmnigud* ‘naming’ and is unlikely to have generated the form we seek. In early Irish, diminutive and hypocoristic forms were assembled in a variety of ways, not only through the suffixing common to many languages, but also by prefixing nominal elements or personal pronouns. Thus we find *mael* and *ceile* ‘servant, companion, devotee’ and *gilla* ‘boy, servant’ incorporated in such names and terms as *Malachy*, *culdee*, and *Gillespie*. Hypocoristic names of early saints are particularly illustrative, although the diminutive may reflect perceived humility rather than familiarity. A common diminutive suffix was *-án*, attached to masculine and neuter nouns, and a long form *-ócán* is frequent with masculine personal names. Thus we find *Ciarocán* beside *Ciarán* (<*ciar* ‘dark’) and *Dubucán* (<*dub* ‘black’), even *Ísucán* ‘little Jesus’.⁶ Monastic names, often originating in vocative forms, are even more complex, incorporating *tu-*, later *do-* ‘thou’ and *mo-*, *m’* ‘my’, for example, *Tu-Medóc* and *Mo-Chíaróc*.

All kinds of wordplay, puzzles, secret alphabets and arcane lexical sets, rebuses, as well as complex etrics with parallels, metaphors, register shifts, are characteristic of early Irish letters.⁷ Among the supposed secret languages we find ‘parted language’ (*bérta etarsgartha*), ‘obscure language’, (*bérta fortchide*), ‘cryptic language’ (*iarm*

bérta), along with the more widely known *bearlagair na saor* ‘language of the craftsmen’. Early etymologizing (Irish *etarscarad* ‘cutting between, separation’) broke words down into syllables, then imaginatively redefined these. For example, *consain* ‘consonant’ (a Latin loan) is equated with *cainsuin* ‘beautiful sounds’ then further glossed *suin taitnemcha* ‘bright sounds’. In a nominally light-hearted quatrain, the poet Flann Mac Lonain warns his princely patron to have the table well set. Since his patronymic could be analyzed as ‘son of the blackbird’ he identifies himself in the poem with another blackbird word, *vergagán*, and works up a second avian pun (which echoes his own) for his lord Finnguine, also known as *cenn-gegain* ‘gosling head’⁸. We even have a learned tract, *Cóir Anmann*, devoted to the ‘Fitness of Names’⁹. In the relatively closed *milioux* of the learned Irish *literati*, where poetry was often a traditional family vocation, a term for a pen-name could have emerged. Later, perhaps in the course of the collapse of the old Gaelic order, such a word could have been preserved among a comparable, if less formally educated, community such as the travelers. This is not to subscribe to Kuno Meyer’s thesis that *Shelta* is directly traceable to the arcane jargons of the *literati* of earlier ages but only to state that Ireland had a long tradition of cryptolects. *Shelta*, it should be emphasized, is basically English in its syntax and some of its morphology; only key terms of the vocabulary are borrowed from Irish (and in some few instances, from Romani).¹⁰ Informed speculation would put its origins as a cryptolect in the early seventeenth century, a period characterized by widespread Irish-English bilingualism, with the tide already turned in favor of the latter, paradoxically leaving Irish lexis open to appropriation by travelers as material for further encryption.

Thus, in the semi-playful context of lexical innovation among members of a partially self-selected outsider group, we could hypothesize a term for names that were public within the group and private beyond it, something like **m’ainmmucán* (‘my little name’) or, without recourse to the possessive adjective but taking into account letter and syllable reversals, **mainucán/munucán* (‘nickname’). (Parenthetically, it may be noted that *nickname* is itself traced to *eke-name* with the possible later affect of *nick*. Were this the case, I would see the *nick*, a notch in the ear of livestock as an identifier, as the likely active meaning). If this explanation is judged plausible, we would have to posit the replacement of the final Irish suffix by the more common English agent suffix *-er*: **manucan > moniker*.¹¹

OED’s first attestation of *moniker* from the mid-nineteenth century leaves a long period of semi-submerged use if we judge Irish *ainm*, in one or another form, at the origin, but this is not without parallels and seems particularly appropriate for a word that originated in an insider jargon. Unsurprisingly, *moniker* was rapidly adapted into North American and Australian slang (examples in *OED*), conceivably by Irish speakers of English, perhaps under conditions of itinerant life among

underemployed men, especially during the Depression, conditions not dissimilar to those of the Irish travelers.

From the combined contributions of community members, enthusiasts, and academics we are now in a position to quantify and explain the assumption into English of vocabulary from the other languages of Britain and can go some way toward explaining the social dynamics that prompted such borrowing, an area where *OED* has traditionally trodden very softly. The biases of earlier lexicographers will now have to be addressed. In particular, the contribution of Hiberno-English and Anglo-Romani to popular English, albeit in what *OED* continues to call the “lower and more slangy stratum of speech”, entails that a good many dictionary entries are badly in need of a thorough revision, a revision that one might hope would extend to the ethnic, social, and vocational identifiers employed there.¹²

Postscript

Many of the lexicographical issues alluded to above also inform the current investigation of Caló, the para-Romani dialects of the Iberian Gypsies. Apparently shortly after their arrival in Spain in the mid-fifteenth century the speech of the Gypsies, in a complex process of coincident language erosion and language encryption, became increasingly based on the lexis, morphology, and syntax of Andalusian Spanish, while also interacting with other cryptolalic speech such as the underclass cant called *germania*.¹³ Lexical encryption in Caló was intended to keep a central cultural vocabulary at a distance from non-Gypsies. The maintenance of numerous key words from Romani was complemented by various devices of lexical disguise applied to Andalusian words: sound arrangement and substitution, semantic transfer, the addition of suffixes, various kinds of word play. This tendency was continued when Caló lexis was adopted into underclass cant, as Gypsy styles of song, dance, and instrumental music were assumed by Spaniards of more privileged classes in the vogue of *flamenguismo*. While it is not claimed that the basic notion of ‘name’ is equivalent to *moniker*, with its distinctive affective value, it may be of interest to conclude with the Caló equivalents of Castilian *nombre*. These are the variants *acnao*, *asnao*, *nao*, all directly traceable to Common Romani *naw* ‘name’ and cognate with Indo-Aryan *nāman* (Wolf 1987:160-61). While the use of the Romani word precludes the need for further lexical disguise, the Caló forms bear a slight, rather playful resemblance —as if a fortuitous allusion— to *nombre*. Just as English lexicography has neglected the contributions of Irish traveler language and Anglo-Romani to English, the true nature of Spanish Caló is only now beginning to be recovered by scholars such as Ignasi-Xavier Adiego (1998, 2004, 2005), who has shown up the basic errors that inform a long

succession of Caló-Castilian dictionaries, largely derivative one from another and often incorporating spurious pseudo-Caló coinages. Nor should we think that Caló is irretrievably behind us: the popular Latin American terms, largely used as vocatives, *mano/mana* ‘buddy, pal’, despite their Romance inflection, descend in a straight line from Romani *manuš* ‘human being, person’ (Wolf 1987: 146, s.v. *manusch*; Sayers, forthcoming)

Notes

¹. OED Online 2002, s.v. *moniker* (19 July, 2007).

². *Dictionary of the Irish Language 1913-76* sees *cainnt* ‘speaking, conversation’ as a verbal noun derived from *canaid* ‘chants, recits’, with some possible influence from later English *cant*. But other Irish words such as *cáin* ‘law, regulation’ and *cáined* ‘reviles, satirizes’, illustrative of marked language, suggest that a demotion of *cainnt* from the *littérateurs* to travelers may have been a purely domestic development, sparked by socio-economic conditions.

³. Macalister (1937: 204); the title had earlier been used by the Celticist Kuno Meyer in *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society* (January, 1909). Macalister conducted no field work and relied on collections by Leland and Sampson of many decades earlier. His list of Shelta words is augmented by some 90 words (not all Shelta) collected from Irish travelers by an admitted amateur (see Cleve 1983). Birch (1983) offers, as far as Shelta is concerned, only a rehash of Macalister. For a more professional typological assessment, see Hancock (1974). A none-too-rigorous Shelta dictionary is in progress at <http://www.travellersrest.org/sheltanocant990418.htm>; access to many entries is restricted to the traveler community.

⁴. Among the former are *American Heritage Dictionary* (2000): probably from Shelta *munik*, possibly from Old Irish *ainm*;

The Cassell Dictionary of Slang (1998), s.v. *monniker*, favoring derivation from *monarch* or *monogram*. Among the latter: *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (1969), Klein (1966-67), *The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology* (1995). *The Random House Dictionary of American Slang* (1994) takes no position and states “origin unknown”. OED refers to the entry *monaker* in Partridge (1984: 747), but this is such a hotchpotch of diverse exemplifications and explanations as to be all but unreadable and no preferred origin is identified.

⁵. See Macalister (1937: 164-74) on Shelta word formation, supplemented by Hancock (1984a: 384-403). The name *Shelta* merits a brief pause. Meyer thought the variant form *Sheldru* was derived by Shelta’s own rules from Old Irish *béira* ‘speech’ (literally ‘mouth matters’; modern Irish *béarla* ‘English language’). More plausible is that Shelta is related to Irish *scaoilte*, variously ‘loose, unbound, scattered, undone, free, irregular’ or another related verb of separation. While these terms might seem to apply to the travelers themselves, they describe equally well word-formation in the jargon; cf. the *etarscarad* ‘cutting between’ of the earlier Irish etymologists. Despite present usage, Macalister sees *Sheldru/Shelthru* as a more original term for the jargon. On the above model one could hypothesize a reversal of *dluige* ‘splitting, cleaving’ as *g-l-d + ra > *geldru > sheldru*.

6. Cited from Thurneysen (1946: 173).
7. For alphabets and lexical sets, see Calder, G. (ed.) 1917. *Auraicept na n-Éces: The Scholar's Primer*. On pen and other names, see Herren (1996) and on metrics, from a comparative perspective, Tranter (1997) and McTurk (2005: 148-87).
8. Fuller discussion of these two and other examples in Sayers (2006).
9. Recently discussed in Arbuthnot (2001).
10. See Hancock (1974).
11. Among Shelta suffixes, *-ik* is not one of the most frequent, but could have been added directly to a recast *ainm* to yield *munik*; in this case the English agent suffix *-er* would
- be a further addition, with semantic value of 'that which designates'.
12. For Irish and Hiberno-English, among recently completed reference works that will aid in this task may be mentioned: *English-Irish Dictionary* (1987), *A Dictionary of Anglo-Irish: Words and Phrases from Gaelic in the English of Ireland* (2000), *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English: The Irish Use of English* (1998), *Slanguage: A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English in Ireland* (1997), and, as an example with a local focus, *A Concise Ulster Dictionary* (1996). As concerns Anglo-Romani, see the exemplary works of Hancock (1979, 1984a).
13. After Adiego (2005), Borrow (1841) and Usoz y Río (in Torrión (1987)) are recognized as the only trustworthy sources for nineteenth-century caló.

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